



Death toll rises in ferry disaster

Senegal now says 970 missing or dead

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By Jamey Keaten
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DAKAR, Senegal — In long, solemn lines, thousands of people pored over photos Sunday of the bloated bodies from one of Africa's deadliest ferry accidents, as the government said that nearly 1,000 people are now believed dead.

Only 64 people are known to have survived when the MS Joola capsized off Africa's West Coast in heavy winds late Thursday. On Sunday, the government said that 1,034 people were on board the ship, sharply up from the 797 it had first announced.

By midday Sunday, Gambian and Senegalese sailors, dive teams and other searchers had collected 352 bodies from the ferry, the water and from along the coast, where some were washing up, said Aminata Dibba, permanent secretary for Gambia's presidency.

Six refrigerated ship containers with bodies inside were lined up in the capital's port, while hundreds more disintegrating bodies were offshore waiting to be brought in.

Authorities planned Monday to finish an investigation into what caused the Senegalese state-run boat to sink off Gambia, a former English colony about 30 miles across at its widest point that divides north and south Senegal.

Grieving family members studied photos of the dead in hopes of identifying rapidly decomposing victims.

"Now there seems to be little chance they'll come back alive," said Tijane Jalow, 29, who had three brothers on board.

"This is awful, awful, awful. I'm inconsolable," he said, pinching his eyes.

On Sunday, the government added the 55-member crew and said 185 passengers had boarded the doomed ferry at a second stop en route from southern Senegal, bringing the total aboard to 1,034, said Diadji Toure, communication's adviser for Senegal's prime minister.

Authorities set up five "crisis centers" in Dakar to display photos of those retrieved from the wreckage. Boy Scouts rushed bottled water and food to more than 3,000 people who waited in line throughout the day, officials said.

Ambulance teams tended to people who passed out from temperatures of about 92 degrees Fahrenheit.

Many victims' faces were too waterlogged to be recognizable. One bleary-eyed woman wailed "Papa, Papa!" as she was helped away from a display.

At the port in Dakar, young men crouched in the shade, pressing radios to their ears. Most family members were calm but bickered with army guards providing slow access to the photo lineup. Senegal's flag flew at half-staff in the last of three days of national mourning.

Capt. Samba Fall of the Senegalese navy said many children were on board because they were returning from summer vacation from the southern Casamance region, known for its powdery beaches. He declined to say how many children were on board or believed missing.

The government has pledged financial support for the families of the victims, and relatives who identified victims were to be helped in arranging funerals, Fall said.

"No one could have ever imagined this. If God wants this to happen, we can't do anything about it," said police officer Jerome Dieme, whose 20-year-old son, Serge, was on board. Dieme was one of about 1,000 military, rescue, medical and security personnel deployed to help family members.

Ferries are the main way of transportation between north and south Senegal, in part because travel by road is slowed by border checks passing through Gambia. Merchants carrying dried fish, mangos and other goods from verdant Casamance make up many of the usual travelers aboard.

Angry Senegalese cited media reports that the ferry was designed for no more than 600 passengers. The ferry had only recently returned to service after a year in repair.

While many said they thought the government was doing all it could, a few others said it had provided too few answers about the condition of the ferry.

"All we've been getting is lies," said Isidore Diatta, 25, who had two friends on board.

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